

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - The Metaphysics Of Argument: Two Proposals About Presuppositions



Sometimes it is hard to know where politics ends and metaphysics begins: when, that is, the stakes of a political dispute concern not simply a clash of competing ideas and values but a clash about what is real and what is not, what can be said to exist on its own and what owes its existence to another.

- J.M. Bernstein, *"The Very Angry Tea Party"* (*The New York Times*, June 13, 2010)

All modern philosophy hinges round the difficulty of describing the world in terms of subject and predicate, substance and quality, particular and universal. The result always does violence to that immediate experience which we express in our actions, our hopes, our sympathies, our purposes, and which we enjoy in spite of our lack of phrases for its verbal analysis. We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures; whereas. . .orthodox philosophy can only introduce us to solitary substances, each enjoying an illusory experience. . .

- A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 49[i]

We understand argumentation as a political practice, and propose that argumentation theory has neglected to attend to that "clash about what is real and what is not, what can be said to exist on its own and what owes its existence of another" that informs the diverse points of view - the "clash of competing ideas and values" - that is displayed in argumentative engagements. That neglect is due to a powerful presumption that has its roots in the primacy that Aristotle gave to substance, rather than relation, as well as the preeminence that Plato accorded to stable concepts (eternal Ideas) in contrast to changing things (the materiality of our "immediate experience").[ii]

Questioning and even overturning this powerful presumption of "solitary substances," which persists in rationalistic, constructive idealist, and empiricist traditions, is not an easy endeavor. The exigency for doing so is strengthened by

arguments for the value of argumentation theory and informal logic, rather than formal deductive logic, for analyzing, understanding, and arguing about that “buzzing world” of our “immediate experience.” In this essay we propose that Alfred North Whitehead’s process-relational metaphysics offers an alternative to the “violence” that (as he proposes in our second epigraph) “modern” or “orthodox” philosophy does to “that immediate experience which we express in our actions, our hopes, our sympathies, [and] our purposes.” Thus, we would modify Jay Bernstein’s suggestion: we cannot know “where politics [or, argumentation] ends and metaphysics begins” because - in our “immediate experience” - there is no severance between those activities. However, an implicit traditional metaphysics that gives primacy to particular substances (subjects) and universal predicates (qualities) remains as the ground that nurtures the explicit “clash of competing ideas and values” that are the content of argumentation.

1. Two Proposals

Our first proposal, then, is that our epistemological endeavors would benefit by accepting the need to critically investigate our metaphysical presumptions. That’s because affective, cognitive, cultural, and social assumptions about what is to be known exert an influence - perhaps, even determine - how we go about epistemic endeavors. Metaphysical inquiry, we would emphasize, is not an optional additional level in, aspect of, or tier within argumentation - because all theory and practice, including argumentation, presupposes some metaphysics. Nor is it a concern with how premises are generated from ideas or beliefs. Rather, this first proposal calls for reflection upon the elements and relations that are presumed as present in arguments (as products), by way of examining the presuppositions that are embedded in the process and procedure of argumentation.

In making this proposal, we focus on the first and second of Joseph Wenzel’s “three different ways of thinking about argumentation” (1990, p. 9), rather than the third way: We regard argumentation as rhetorical and dialectical, rather than as logical; which is to say that we focus upon argumentation as a process of communicative interaction and procedure for organizing what’s articulated in that interaction, rather than as a product that enables evaluation of what’s articulated in order to assess its strength or validity. We recognize that all three perspectives are valuable, yet propose that the first two are more appropriate for analysis of argumentation understood as a political practice concerning the “immediate experience which we express in our actions.” Not coincidentally, the rhetorical

and dialectical perspectives emphasize the fluidity, relationality, and contingency of that “buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures” that characterize our reality, rather than focusing upon abstracted conceptual content that, within the third (logical) perspective, is articulated as its form.

We believe that making these assumptions about the nature of reality explicit and proposing alternative presuppositions enables a re-specified understanding of argumentation that focuses upon what actually happens in our “immediate experience.” That understanding, in turn, enables us to envision rationales for making decisions that choose among the plethora of affective, cognitive, cultural, and social possibilities for action that compose that “buzzing world.” As in Bernstein’s analysis of the anger that motivates the Tea Party, we can move beyond obsession with the “clash of competing ideas and values” insofar as we acknowledge that we are divided about “what is real and what is not; what can be said to exist on its own and what owes its existence to another.” This focus on “what actually happens” and on the nature of reality motivates our first proposal, and is developed further as the core of our second proposal.

Our second proposal is that respecifying argumentation theory on the basis of a process-relational metaphysics allows us to analyze the powerful presence, within argumentation, of that reality that is our “immediate experience” – despite the “illusory” overlay of solitary substances and mental representations, as formulated in verbal argumentation, from which argument analysis traditionally begins. Rather than understanding argumentation as disagreement between Cartesian subjects about diverse representational predicates, we can identify the diversity of ideas and values as intrinsic to the process by which arguers become who they are and how that coming-to-be continues in and through argumentive engagement. In other words: replacing a substantialist, individualist, and empiricist metaphysics with a process-relational metaphysics offers us a way of accounting for how particular ideas and values come to be a part of arguers’ process of coming-to-be, and how alternative ideas and values might be advocated more successfully than setting them out in opposition to those currently held.

In this essay, we introduce Whitehead’s process-relational metaphysics and briefly indicate the value of this alternative framework for clarifying, rather than “doing violence to,” immediate experience. Two conceptual shifts are needed at the start. First, although argumentation theory typically is considered to be an epistemological endeavor, we need to acknowledge that implicit – which is to say,

unnoticed and unexamined – metaphysical presuppositions underlie all theory, including any epistemological theory. The conceptual shift that’s needed here is toward explicating these presuppositions and discerning their influence. Doing that takes us to the second conceptual shift: We need to expand our theoretical resources for understanding the “clash about what is real and what is not” that, we believe, is operative within argumentation – usually, implicitly – and especially, when argumentation becomes obstructed by deep disagreement. **[iii]**

2. Whitehead’s Process-Relational Framework

We advocate this process-relational theory as alternative to traditional “modern” or “orthodox” philosophy, which (as he notes) relies upon a “subject and predicate, substance and quality, particular and universal” understanding of reality. This alternative enables us to reconsider modern philosophy’s characterization of humans as either passive recipients of sense-data or active imposers of form upon a sensory manifold. It also enables us to resist postmodern philosophy’s focus on the linguistic formulation of experience, which has reinforced argumentation theory’s proclivity for beginning analysis at the level of verbal, rather than experiential (affective and embodied), modes of being. In other words, theorizing argumentation within a process-relational metaphysical framework requires us to suspend acceptance of both empiricist and rationalistic presumptions. Once we understand this very different way of considering the environment, we can test its comparative efficacy by applying it to an example of argumentation about “immediate experience.” Thus, we begin by introducing terminology for some of the very basic claims of a process-relational framework.

Whitehead understands mind as an “actual occasion” rather than as a substance that requires only itself to exist – that is, which is independent of the material world, including mind’s physical embodiment. An actual occasion functions as a locus of response, and thus relation, to an environment that is not limited to present space-time. Rather, each occasion grasps, and draws from, past actuality as well as future possibility. Whitehead calls this grasping “prehension,” and cautions that unlike apprehension, which is a comparatively familiar mental activity, it is motivated by affective sensory attraction and repulsion, rather than cognition. Actual occasions continually form themselves as actual entities through retaining past prehensions while appropriating possibilities that are present to them as propositions.

Within this framework, propositions are not statements with a truth value. Rather,

they are potential ways that occasions may come to be as actual entities. Selection of some propositions and deflection of others depends upon the interest and intensity of their anticipation, within the immediate experience of a prehending actual entity. Truth is still a useful category within this process-relational metaphysics, but it is not a matter of language that corresponds to reality (mentality to materiality) or coherence within an already accepted structure in the mind or in language. Rather, it pertains to correspondence between how an actual occasion (or group of occasions, which Whitehead calls a “nexus”) may be, and how it is. Although particular truth claims can be refuted, we cannot be certain that any particular claim is true. Those that resist efforts to refute them can be retained as, at least, closer to truth than refuted claims. Making an argument, then, is not a matter providing statements that correspond to how things are or should be in a pattern that results in having a valid, and even sound, argument. Rather, it is an activity of acknowledging the relative appeal of how things might come to be. Consideration and choice among possibilities is a response to the aesthetic and affective appeal with which they are present to prehension, rather than of calculative rationality. Selection or choice happens by relating to the more appealing alternative possibility, rather than by making a cognitive decision between opposing claims. It depends on an actual entity’s entertaining those possibilities as potentially providing a more fitting continuation with the past and future, rather than requiring a conceptual decision that’s constrained by already available ideas and values as they are asserted within an oppositional agenda.

3. A Case Study: The Tea Party

This conception of what happens in reasoning suggests a response to Jay Bernstein’s question in the editorial that provides our first epigraph. The context in which he finds that metaphysics and politics are difficult to separate is contemporary concern, within U.S. political argumentation, about the “Very Angry Tea Party.” The “seething anger” of the Tea Party, Bernstein argues, resists explanation through traditional logics of interest group pluralism. The Tea Party forwards no coherent policy proposals, nor does it protest in order to acquire political power. What matters about the Tea Party, and what no one has yet been able to explain, Bernstein argues, is the “exorbitant character” of its anger. Given the fury of its protests and how that fury “is already reshaping our political landscape,” he proposes that the important question is not what does the Tea Party want, but where does “such anger and such passionate attachment to wildly

fantastic beliefs come from?”

Bernstein’s hypothesis is that the source of this anger is not merely political, but metaphysical. That is, the last several years of crisis and reform, disaster and response – particularly within the U.S. political economy – has shown that we are utterly dependent on government action, even as its limitations, corruptions, and incompetence have never been clearer. What has unraveled in these recent crisis-ridden years is the “belief that each individual is metaphysically self-sufficient, that one’s standing and being as a rational agent owes nothing to other individuals and institutions.” The autonomous individual has been revealed as an “artifact” manufactured by the “practices of modern life: the intimate family, the market economy, the liberal state.”

The poverty of the metaphysical commitments underwriting autonomous individualism has been exposed, and that creates an opening for Bernstein to propose an alternate metaphysical claim: Human subjectivity “only emerges through intersubjective relations.” Each of us is called into being by the other, wholly dependent on the other’s love for our freedom. Our independence is, therefore, “held in place and made possible by complementary structures of dependence.” Love, however, can go bad and when it does we realize that we are “absolutely dependent on someone for whom we ‘no longer count,’ we feel “vulnerable, needy, unanchored and without resource.” This vulnerability unleashes fury. We rage against our former love, proclaiming our independence, denying that we ever needed the other (whether personal or institutional) in the first place. This is the anger of the Tea Party. They are jilted lovers furious that they have been let down by their government, furious that they find themselves dependent and powerless. They feel all that comes with love’s betrayal: rage, disillusionment, sorrow, and confusion. Searching for the source of this betrayal becomes an obsession, expressed in terms of who has stolen their country and how they can get it back. Their anger leaves them epistemically vulnerable, ready to believe just about any conspiracy, any rumor, any fear-mongering appeal that can pinpoint the culprit.

Bernstein is careful not to imply that all political anger is metaphysically suspect. We ought to be angry at the “thoughtless greed of Wall Street bankers” and the “brutal carelessness of BP.” We have been betrayed. But there is a difference between moral indignation “raised by cruelty and injustice” and the “exorbitant and destructive” anger raised by resentment of the fact that we are inescapably

interdependent. The former is an expression of concern that fosters moral community; the latter seeks to destroy the institutions, such as town-hall meetings, which sustain community. Moral indignation leads to “creative, intelligent, non-violent” resistance; fear-induced rage towards the other leads to nihilistic terror. The Tea Party, thus far, has been a party of resentment. But if it traded its rage in regard to what has been taken from individuals (a sense of autonomy that does not correspond to the reality of the human condition) for indignation about how government has been corrupted so that it destroys real human needs, the seemingly intransigent opposition between left and right may be redirected from the diversity of ideas and values that attract and repel them, and toward common acknowledgment of the need for change in current political practices. Radicals of all stripes could be in “angry agreement” that democracy has indeed been hijacked by corporations, special interests, lobbyists, and self-serving, corrupt public servants. Their righteous indignation could be directed towards a common project of increasing public accountability and restoring self-government through increasing the opportunities for authentic public deliberation.

4. The Nature of Argumentation: Two Insights

We find Bernstein’s diagnosis of “passionate attachment” persuasive and his call to “indignation” compelling (although we differ from some of the particulars of his argument). Putting his analysis into the process-relational metaphysical terminology we have introduced provides these insights into the nature of argumentation as a political practice:

(1) A process-relational account of argument is uniquely suited to understanding the dynamics of affective politics.

The effectiveness of the Tea Party’s fury in reshaping the US political landscape exemplifies a shift from a content-driven politics (ideas and values in opposition) to an affective politics (the lure of possibilities that attract or repel). The Tea Party’s significance, Bernstein makes clear, lies in the “exorbitant” character of its anger,” not in any concrete policy proposal or party platform it might forward. Affective politics are driven by image, tone, resonance, movement, and rhythm. Its governing terms are confidence, trust, support, and mood. It is a politics of the body, or more precisely of the becoming-body; a chosen coalescence of neurochemical reactions to environmental stimulations. Affective politics comes from a transfer of energy, of commitment among successive waves of actors, of how energy designs processes that serve as technologies of collaboration. Affective politics is a politics of relation in which the quality of life is increasingly

defined in terms of modulating attachment, attunement, and attention.

Thus, Bernstein's question - "where does" the Tea Party's "anger and passionate attachment to wildly fantastic beliefs come from" - directs us toward an important contribution that a process-relational understanding of argumentation can make to the study of affective politics. Argumentation theory has had relatively little to say about the nature of affective attachment to particular claims and beliefs because it has operated from an overly cognitive account of the relationship between mind, body, and environment. This account treats them as distinct entities whose impact on the processes of reasoning and arguing is taken for granted and little understood. Moreover, argumentation has been treated as an exclusively cognitive and verbal activity that occurs in and through conscious reflection, despite growing evidence discrediting that view, as well as the increasing attention of many theoreticians to visual argumentation. A process-relational metaphysics, to the contrary, understands argumentation, in Erin Manning's words, "as a complex passage from thought to feeling to concepts-in-prearticulation to events in the making" (2009, p. 5). A process-relational account understands thought not as a property of the mind, but as an activity of the minded body in dynamic response to, and thus in relation with, the diverse loci of allure and appeal that are continually emergent within its environment. In sum, one of the insights available to a process-relational analysis is that argumentation is very much more than is suggested by the final form it takes in language.

(2) Argumentation is inherently collaborative, not oppositional. Opposition is an artifact of substantialist metaphysics and the governmentality of liberalism that accompanies it.

A process-relational view provides us with a means to theorize our environment as a world that is made of events in dynamic relationship. Even seemingly solid and permanent objects are events, or better a series of events in the making, whose composition changes moment by moment. The continuity implied by the existence of enduring objects needs to be actively produced at every instant as a new event. The same is true of us and our perception of those objects. The persistent flow of perception and conception constitutes us anew as subjects. Each instant of every encounter is a new event and each of the selves to which it happens is also a fresh event. This does not entail that objects are created by our perception; it does entail that their shape and importance is formed in perceptual events of interaction with them. Objects-as-events are possibilities for choice, as

they are present for perceptual or conceptual engaging of them by actual entities. This account reverses the Kantian assumption that “the world emerges from the subject.” A process-relational metaphysics reveals, instead, that “the subject emerges from the world.” We are born in the very course of our encounter with the world and are precipitated out this encounter, “like salt precipitated out of a solution” (Shaviro 2009, p. 21). For Whitehead there is no ontological difference between thoughts and things, between animate beings and so-called inanimate objects. The same goes for arguments and arguers. Each is grasped from the “buzzing world” of immediate experience, existing in a “democracy of fellow creatures.”

We have suggested that this grasping, which Whitehead calls prehension, is itself a description of argumentation. That is, argumentation is not simply a distinct activity that we can describe in process-relational terms. Rather, argumentation is at the heart of the process of becoming. Events are constituted through the creative interplay of past occasions of experience and the potentiality of anticipated experience. Their expression as propositions does not provide verbal assertion of goodness or truth, but does make choices available for the ongoing integration that constitutes actual entities. In other words, propositions are neither actual or fictive; they are ‘the tales that can be told about particular actualities’ from a given perspective, and that enter into the formation - the process that Whitehead calls concrescence - of that very perspective. As such, propositions are possible routes of actualization, vectors of nondeterministic change. (Shaviro 2009, p. 2, quoting Whitehead 1929/1978, p. 256).

Argumentation is the process of assembling and coalescing propositions. It is an essentially creative, collaborative activity, rather than a uniquely “human” activity, insofar as it is understood as an interaction with the environment (both past and anticipated) in which “what is real and what is not” depends not on autonomous individuals or their contexts and not on causation or cognition, but on affective, cognitive, cultural, and social response to the allure of what may be.

One conclusion that we draw from this account of argumentation is that the taken-for-granted understanding of argumentation as inherently oppositional is itself a proposition; a proposal - perhaps particularly appealing and attractive within our cultural and political environment - of how choice among possibilities happens. For instance, argumentation may be theorized as a critical discussion aimed at resolving a difference of opinion in which a protagonist defends a certain

standpoint against the challenge of an antagonist who raises doubts about and objections to the acceptability of that standpoint (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, & Snoeck Henkemans 2002, p. 25). To characterize this theory as an interesting and perhaps appealing tale told of how reality happens does not mean that it is false. It does mean that it is a verbal abstraction, necessarily static (given the nature of both abstraction and verbiage). As such - as an abstraction from immediate experience - we commit what Whitehead calls "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" if we take it as real, or as a description or representation of the real. The fallacy to be avoided here is metaphysical, not logical: "misplaced concreteness" is to be avoided because it "does violence to. . . immediate experience" (Whitehead 1929/1978, p. 49).

Any theory portraying argumentation as oppositional in nature is, we contend (following Bernstein) a metaphysical "artifact manufactured by the "practices of modern life: the intimate family, the market economy, the liberal state." It is no accident that the logic of opposition works so well to explain the machinations of these institutions. Opposition is the lifeblood of liberal governmentality, which requires that individuals be defined by their irreconcilable differences, standing ready to engage in total war if they are without the mediation of the state. Just as essential to the logic of opposition is the presumption that the state presents an ever present threat to the sovereignty of its citizens. In this respect the Tea Party's rage is not an aberration of liberalism; it is a pathological expression of contemporary liberalism's nature.

The test of a proposition is not whether it is true, coherent, or plausible. A proposition is "a lure for feeling"; a means to "pave the way along which the world advances into novelty" (Whitehead, 1929/1978, p. 187). Propositions should be assessed in terms of their aesthetic appeal, creativity, and potential for inventing novel platforms for collaboration. Argumentation theory, presently conceived within a substantialist metaphysics, can inform criticism of the Tea Party's fury and demonstrate the irrationality of their "wildly fantastic beliefs," but it cannot explain the nature of their "passionate attachments" nor propose a means to transcend the fierce logics of neoliberal governmentality that pervert them. We advocate adoption of Whitehead's metaphysical theory as the framework for understanding argumentation as a relational process, rather than as a means for generating oppositional arguments, as the way of doing just that.

NOTES

[i] Unless identified otherwise, the quoted phrases from Whitehead in this essay are taken from this epigraph.

[ii] Arguably, this presumption continued to guide philosophical thinking about reasoning from classical to modern times, when it was expressed in René Descartes' conception of humans as mental substances - solitary minds - whose thinking focuses on ideas (mental events) that describe or represent their material environment. It is also expressed in Immanuel Kant's conception of humans as dictating the form of physical substance, which was taken to be independent of, and subservient to, mind. And it was expressed in David Hume's and Thomas Hobbes' conceptions of humans as passive recipients of sense data, and thus, of mentality as dependent upon materiality.

[iii] Concern with the challenges of "deep disagreement" to argumentation traces back to the germinal article by Robert Fogelin (1985). The editors of a special issue of *Informal Logic* in 2005 (which reprints that article) note that they hope to "spark renewed reflection on these sorts of fundamental questions" (Turner and Campolo, 2005, p. 2). See David Zarefsky's (2010) paper for a current contribution to that reflection. See also the discussion by Frans van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, Sally Jackson, & Scott Jacobs (1993, pp. 171-172) of the empirical challenges of deep disagreements to pragma-dialectics. We believe that these "fundamental questions" call for reflection on the metaphysical presuppositions that participants bring to argumentative engagement

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